BLESSED INTRUDER
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PSALM 105:1–11
MATTHEW 13:31–33, 44–46
GENESIS 32:22–31

"Jacob was left alone;
and a man wrestled with him until daybreak."
Genesis 32:24 (NRSV)

God, scripture assures us, is not in the whirlwind.
God is not in a plethora of anything—
words, places, rituals, ecclesiastical games, or people.
God is simply right where we are.
Which, of course, is why God is hard to find.
We are always looking elsewhere.
"There," says the church.
"There," says the society.
But God is here—right here—all the while.

Joan Chittister
Called to Question

Last Sunday, just as I settled in to watch the Cubs and the Pirates, I was interrupted. "Here's something that you should find interesting," my companion said, referring to the sermons I have been preaching in response to a *Chicago Tribune* editorial about the fact that people don't know much about the Bible any longer. As the game was starting, she regaled me with an account of the 41st National Bible Bowl Tournament, held at the Chicago Hilton last week. Two hundred teams from thirty states gathered to do battle. The event began with a 400 question quiz on basic Bible content. There was a Bible-quoting bee. The main event, round-robin, double-elimination competition in the Conrad International Ballroom, modeled after the G. E. College Bowl, produced the winner, the team from First Christian Church of Xenia, Ohio.

But then, unwilling to let well enough alone and allow me to refocus on the contest at Wrigley Field where the Cubs were winning, she said, "Here are three sample questions. Let's see how you do." Never one to turn down an

opportunity like that, I agreed, unfortunately. I flunked: missed two out of three.

And so “Bible stories everyone should know,” this series of sermons focusing on a few basic, formative stories in the book of Genesis, stories that are important to the Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

> Noah, the flood and the ark, the rainbow and God’s promise never to abandon creation, a promise made to every living creature
>
> Abraham and Sarah, called in their old age to pick up and move into an uncertain future, blessed to be a blessing
>
> Hagar and Ishmael, driven into the wilderness, outsiders, the “other,” found and saved by God’s universal love
>
> Jacob’s appalling deception of his father, Isaac, and brother, Esau, aided by his mother; his flight from his brother’s wrath; his dream and God’s promise to be with him wherever he went, to keep him and bring him home

This morning, “Beloved Intruder.” It is twenty years later, and Jacob is coming home. We left him in the wilderness fleeing, guilty of lying to his father, cheating his brother, but somehow still the object of God’s attention, affection, and promise. He was on his way to his in-laws, his mother Rebekah’s father and brother, Laban. Now twenty years later, he has done very well, but once again he’s on the run as a result of his deception. At least he’s consistent. His story, long and complicated and fascinating, occupies the twenty-fifth through the thirty-fifth chapters of Genesis. He is important to the Judeo-Christian tradition because at the end of this story he will have a new name: in Hebrew, “Isra”—to strive with, contend with, wrestle; “el”—God. “Israel”: “strives with God.” He will have twelve sons, the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel, one of whom, Joseph, will become important for his coat of many colors, and another of whom, Judah, will be the many times great grandfather of David, the king, and, centuries later, Jesus of Nazareth.

We call them patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph—and matriarchs too—Sarah, Hagar, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah. Women play equally critical parts in the story.

Jacob is as unlikely a religious patriarch as you’re likely to find anywhere. And you have to ask if the tradition couldn’t have come up with someone a little less flawed. Unless Jacob’s flaws, like his grandfather Abraham’s, are exactly the point.

Jacob received God's promise to be with him, to keep him and bring him home. He is still living with the threat of death at the hand of his brother, Esau, and, one has to assume, is still carrying a burden of guilt and remorse for destroying his family, breaking his father's heart. Twenty years earlier he made his way across the border to his uncle Laban. He married Laban's daughters Leah and Rachel, had many children, and prospers. His success is due again to his deception and fraud. In fact, Jacob has been systematically stealing Laban's sheep out from under him. It's really quite creative. And when he has accumulated so much wealth it's embarrassing, he decides it's time to leave again. So while Laban is away, Jacob gathers everything he has and leaves, during the night again, and for good measure, Rachel runs back to the house and steals her family's valuables.

Now they're out in the wilderness again, at a stream, peering across into the land of Canaan—home. Jacob's eyes are peeled: his brother, Esau, is over there somewhere. Behind Jacob an enormous caravan of livestock and camels bearing all his belongings, his wives, and children stretches across the desert. Jacob decides to divide the entourage into two parts; in case Esau attacks, he won't lose everything. He also sends elaborate and generous gifts across the stream to appease Esau if he's over there watching. Then he sends everybody across the stream, the Jabbok, all his livestock, his belongings, his family—everything he has. And he sits down, alone, as he did twenty years before, in the dark, still a fugitive, still guilty and terrified, waiting for the dawn.

During the night an intruder assaults him—not Esau, but a stranger, a man who will not be identified but with whom Jacob wrestles till dawn, who wounds Jacob in the thigh, not mortally, but enough to make him limp the rest of his life, so that as long as he lives he will never forget that night. The stranger will not divulge his name, but he does bless Jacob and give him a new name, Israel, and then leaves him to limp home to a reunion with Esau.

What a story!

Frederick Buechner observes, "The book of Genesis makes no attempt to conceal the fact that Jacob was a 'crook.'" Buechner muses over the fact that instead of receiving the chewing out Jacob deserves from God, he receives another blessing (*Peculiar Treasures*, p. 56).

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann advises us to pay attention to Jacob's emotional state: a combination of terror, guilt, and remorse as he waits in the dark. And all who have studied this story in its historical context—in fact, even casual readers—know that the fact that the intruder remains anonymous, never tells Jacob his name, is critical. To name something, in that world, was to exercise control over it. So what is going

on here is a founding concept of a new tradition that, at its center, has a mystery, unnamed, not controlled. Think of how radical that was. Ancient religions were created to define God, with certainty, and to provide human beings with a way of exercising some control or at least a way to influence the gods. Idols provided a way to envision God, to limit God; a name provides a way to define and control; religious places, rituals, sacrifices all contribute to the human need to pin down, define, and control the ultimate.

But Jacob wrestles all night and cannot pin down his opponent, literally—to pin your opponent to the mat is the goal of wrestling; Jacob cannot do it, can only wrestle, contend, and hold on for dear life. Israel wants nothing to do with idols because they limit God. Israel doesn't even want to name God because to name is to limit. In the earliest Hebrew, God's name is a list of consonants that is unpronounceable, JHWH, which we sometimes call Yahweh. Even today some Orthodox will not say or even write the word *God.* Instead, in print, it appears G-D.

And so at the very heart of our religious tradition is an uneasiness with the tendency of religion to know too much, to eliminate mystery by assuming that it knows all the truth, to define God with such precision that those who question, doubt, or differ are shut out, excommunicated, called heretic and infidel and ultimately—because if you buy into this way of thinking, they are enemies of truth, enemies of God—become enemies who can be eliminated. History is replete with the tragedy of that, from Crusades and Inquisitions and witch burnings to Jihads and Holocausts and terrorist bombings in London. Fundamentalism, in every religion—Islamic, Jewish, Christian—is an expression of the human need for absolute certainty, a way to divide the world between believers and infidels, saved and damned, and with tragic frequency becomes a rational for violence.

God, in this tradition, will not be confined and pinned down and restricted by human religion or the paraphernalia of human religion, including the creeds and theologies of religion. God is a living God, free, unpredictable, mysterious, surprising.

And God, in this tradition, intrudes, comes into life at its most human. Jacob seems to know intuitively, and perhaps that's why he is blessed, that this intruder is the Holy One, is God. Unlike the gods of the other religions, this One does not reside in a building, temple, tabernacle, mosque, or church. This God is not confined to mountaintops or any place humans designate. Rather this God has an amazing way of intruding into human life at its most human, into Abraham's and Sarah's settled old age, into Isaac's and Rebekah's strained family relationships, into Jacob's deception, guilt, and terror.

Furthermore, this God uses and blesses people not as religion usually prescribes it, namely on the basis of goodness, moral purity, theological orthodoxy, but on the basis of something in the heart of God, which we call grace. God's blessing comes not as a reward for goodness but in spite of Jacob's deceitfulness and opportunistic dishonesty. This God simply refuses to act the way we would prefer and instead startles us, over and over, with love and grace beyond our imagining.

And this God comes to contend with us, in many ways the most intriguing idea to emerge from this story.

In a helpful book on preaching, Kenneth Gibble offers wise advice: people in the pews have been wrestling with God all their lives. "Preaching," he says, "is not bringing the truth of God to ignorant souls, but rather entry into conversation with people who have already been asking questions about ultimate reality" (*The Preacher as Jacob*, p. 133).

The list of people who use the metaphor of wrestling with God to describe their own spiritual experience is long and distinguished.

Sister Joan Chittister, Benedictine nun, has written a new book, *Called to Question*, in which she describes her disillusionment with the pat certainties of her religious tradition and too-easy answers and recalls the day she decided to launch her own spiritual journey, venturing outside her own tradition, "the day I began the perilous journey from religion to spirituality, from the certainties of dogma to that long, slow, personal journey into God. That day I began my own wrestling match with God, which no catechism, no creed, could mediate" (p .4).

Elie Wiesel has wrestled with God publicly and eloquently in light of the Holocaust, in book after book. About the strange intruder in the Jacob story, Wiesel writes, "God is everywhere. . . . God does not wait at the end of the road. . . . God accompanies, God is the road, God is present in every extremity" (Gibble, p. 108).

In a recent biography of Martin Luther, Martin Marty says that Luther, a complex figure, one who stands between the Middle Ages and modernity, "makes most sense as a wrestler with God." Luther struggled with guilt, anxiety, and doubt all his life. He traveled across the Alps from Germany to Rome one time to find the certainty that eluded him. He visited every holy site, and he could not stop struggling with the tradition. "At the Lateran Palace, on his knees climbing the Santa Scala, believed to be the very stairs brought to Rome from Jerusalem, steps that Jesus climbed in the court of Pontius Pilot," saying a prayer on each step, at the very top a question still nagged at him: "Who knows whether this is really true?" (p. 13).

Luther is a helpful figure, Marty says, because in the end it was his experience that when he could not conjure up faith, “faith grasped him”—like the unnamed stranger grasped Jacob (xiii).

God, we believe, is the Blessed Intruder, who comes to human life at its most human, in your life and mine, in its extremes, at the edges, at birth and death, but also in the everyday, the common, the betrayals and disappointments, but also in the joy, the occasions of deep gladness. God comes into times of betrayal and separation, but also reconciliation and reunion. God will not, does not, let us go.

One of the most profound insights of the great theologian Paul Tillich was that human beings try to avoid God, flee from God, try to escape God. We do it, he said, by “rushing ahead and ahead, to conquer more space in every direction, in every humanly possible way, to be always active, to be always planning.” Not unlike Jacob, I suppose, who was nothing if not busy planning, scheming, running.

Tillich wrote, “From time to time we may be able to hurl God out of our consciousness, to reject God, to refute—to argue convincingly for his nonexistence and to live comfortably without him.” But there is no escape, the great theologian wrote: “God’s hand falls upon us” (*The Shaking of the Foundations*, p. 40, “God Is Inescapable”).

God comes to Jacob, who is fleeing in terror, trying to escape his own guilt and betrayal.

So God comes sometimes to accost us, intellectually and spiritually. God comes to disturb our conscience when we turn too easily away from suffering and injustice. God comes to agitate our spirits when we stop seeking and searching and conclude that there is no one there, after all. The Spanish philosopher Unamuno said somewhere that we should pray not for peace of mind, but that God will disturb us, make us impatient, longing and seeking and searching.

God comes to Jacob, again, Jacob who is still running, peering through the darkness, on his way home, still frightened.

God blesses Jacob, gives him a reminder of the blessing in his limp, promises to be with Jacob all the way and at the end of the way. God comes to contend with a human being; doesn’t overwhelm, doesn’t defeat him. God, this amazing old story suggests, does something unimaginable: becomes vulnerable, self-limits in order to teach the human being about God’s availability, accessibility, about God’s intimate involvement in human life—a vulnerable God who will risk pain, suffering, defeat, in order to express love; a God who will do just that in an eloquently final way when

One we know as Christ, Emmanuel—God with us—is wounded, crucified, and dies for us.

In the first sermon of this series, I told about my friend and mentor Walter Bouman, professor of theology at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus. We've been friends for nearly thirty years. He is a great theologian, the best teacher I've ever known, and a great human being, who loves life, his family, music—particularly J. S. Bach—unfortunately the St. Louis Cardinals, and he loves God with everything in him. Walt was told recently that he does not have long to live. I described him in that sermon as a "big man with an unkempt beard." Someone sent him a copy of that sermon, and last week I heard from a mutual friend that Walter wishes to object and contend with me about that: his beard is not unkempt. So I withdraw and repent of my irresponsible hyperbole.

Walter is still teaching and mentoring me and many others. He was interviewed by the *Columbus Dispatch,* and to be sure, there was a picture of Walter with a neat, trimmed beard. Walt told the interviewer:

> My greatest source of encouragement is the Christian story of God, into which I was baptized in July of 1929. The Christian good news is that Jesus of Nazareth has been raised from death, that death no longer has dominion over him. I have bet my living, now I am called to bet my dying, that Jesus will have the last word.

With a sense of humor grounded in his strong Lutheran faith, Walt quoted physicist Richard Feynman, who, when he underwent surgery, told the surgeon to wake him up if he was dying. He wanted to experience it firsthand. "My sentiments exactly," Walt said.

And then Walt closed the interview by quoting to the reporter a prayer to which he is drawn these days, a prayer that reminded me of Jacob peering through the darkness into the future, having wrestled with and been wounded and blessed by God, reminded me of you and me, Walt and all of us, as we struggle, wrestle with God in our own way, as we peer into the darkness, the unknown future, whatever it is for us, as we wrestle and as we receive the blessing.

> O Lord, support us all the day long, until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes and the busy world is hushed and the fever of life is over and our work is done. Then, in your mercy, grant us a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last. Amen.